EAST-WEST CENTER

ASIA PACIFIC BULLETIN

Number 467 | April 3, 2019

EastWestCenter.org/APB

The United States and Japan Should Engage Southeast Asia through Science Diplomacy

By Elyse Mark

Withdrawal from major international agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the proliferation of "America First" rhetoric, and an apparent return to economic bilateralism under the Trump administration have eroded American soft power. Compared to 2013, fewer respondents in 2018 from Indonesia, South Korea, the Philippines, and Japan expressed belief that US foreign policy takes the interests of their countries into consideration. While the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy explicitly signals US commitment to the region, the decline of America's international image shows a continued need to demonstrate long-term interest in the welfare of our economic and political allies and partners in the region. The US-Japan Alliance has long served as the backbone of US foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific, and the Japanese approach to science diplomacy may provide an ideal platform to improve US global image through collaboration on public welfare.

Elyse Mark, Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that "While scientific research may inform the creation of foreign policy, it may also be the end product of diplomacy."

Science diplomacy is a relatively new framework in international relations, interweaving scientific research, international collaboration, and foreign policy in a virtuous cycle. While scientific research may inform the creation of foreign policy, it may also be the end product of diplomacy. International cooperation in scientific research does the work of human capacity building and improving people-to-people relations, providing opportunities to advance national goals and international ties while improving public image.

Japan turned early to science diplomacy, publicly announcing the policy direction in a 2008 report from the Cabinet Office's Council for Science and Technology Policy (CSTP), called "Toward the Reinforcement of Science and Technology Diplomacy." The goals of Japan's science diplomacy in this document emphasized mutual benefit for Japan and its partner countries, a focus on addressing global issues and increasing Japan's international presence. Japan's emerging aging society problem fueled the need to develop cross-border human resources; as the Japanese working-age population shrinks, so will the available pool of Japanese leaders in science and technology (S&T). Health burdens of an aging population also call for increased investment in scientific research. Finally, there is likely a competitive element; whereas Japanese S&T publications have steadily decreased since 2000, output from neighbors China and Korea has increased.

As Japanese S&T diplomacy evolved, its goals grew to include regional integration of the scientific community through the East Asia Science & Innovation Area initiative. By 2010, the annual CSTP report stated that integration of Japanese research and development should target developing as well as developed economies, first suggesting the need for equal footing investment with developing partners, rather than aid alone. Japan's 2018 Diplomatic Bluebook links Japanese science and technology diplomacy with the fulfillment of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, calling it a "bridging force." Japan currently has 32 science and technology agreements with 46 countries and the European Union, as well as joint committees

on S&T cooperation in the United States, Singapore, New Zealand, Indonesia, India, Canada, Israel, Brazil, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, Slovenia, Italy, UK, Finland, Netherlands, and the EU. Beyond bilateral agreements, Japan runs a number of programs through the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Health, Education, and Transportation, with a dedicated S&T advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs appointed in 2015, Professor Teruo Kishi. Cross-ministerial projects and bilateral agreements provide a strong bureaucratic foundation for Japanese science diplomacy.

Focus on health is a significant portion of Japan's approach to science diplomacy. The outcome document of the G7 Ise-Shima Summit in 2016 emphasized international cooperation on medical research, and the upcoming G20 in Osaka is expected to address concerns about aging populations and universal health coverage. Under the Japanese Agency for Medical Research and Development, several organizations promote science diplomacy. These include the Strategic International Collaborative Research Program (SICORP), which works on a ministerial level to fund cooperative research projects, the e-ASIA Joint Research Program, which uses equal-footing investment to promote multinational collaboration in the East Asia Science & Innovation Area, and the longstanding US-Japan Cooperative Medical Sciences Program.

In the United States, meanwhile, science diplomacy is generally led by the Office of Science and Technology Cooperation in the Department of State's Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs. Similar to Japan, the United States is part of over 50 bilateral S&T partnerships, with three flagship diplomatic science programs: the Embassy Science Fellows Program, the Global Innovation through Science and Technology Initiative, and the US Science Envoy Program. Specific to health research, The Fogarty International Center at the US National Institutes of Health supports a significant amount of global health collaboration focused on HIV/AIDS and human capacity needs in Africa.

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Although the United States is a global leader in science, technology, and medicine, it has not made the same level of concerted effort to market its science diplomacy as Japan has, particularly in the area of health. Outside of grants offered by the US-Japan Cooperative Medical Sciences program, the United States has not geared its collaborative health research opportunities toward the Indo-Pacific, preferring to concentrate on Africa. While numerous NIH grants for medical research projects and training programs are available to Southeast Asian researchers, they are open to the broader international community in general and not marketed regionally. Moreover, institutional capacity differences between the ASEAN 6 and Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam means that scientists outside ASEAN are often less competitive for these grants, leading to outreach gaps. This is a missed opportunity for the United States to strengthen its soft power presence, particularly in Southeast Asia, where infectious disease burdens are higher and countries are especially vulnerable to future environmental and health challenges of climate change. Bridging the gap between the Department of State, USAID, and NIH efforts to promote international scientific collaboration, as well as increasing the international visibility of these programs, would enhance the effectiveness of science diplomacy for the United States.

Further, the United States should increase its science and technology exchange with Southeast Asia in the area of health with the US-Japan alliance at the heart of these efforts. Where the United States struggles with issues of public perception in the region, Japan has built a generally favorable reputation as a stable, norm-based democratic leader highly involved with regional institutions. Japan's preexisting models of equal-footing partnership in global health (as seen in the e-ASIA JRP), and its commitment to meeting UN sustainable development goals make it the ideal partner to help the United States increase its science diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific. Such equal-footing partnerships make international cooperation and exchange with scientific communities outside ASEAN more accessible for not just Southeast Asians, but also for US and Japanese researchers. Regardless of economic or political tensions in the region, US investment into health and medical research signals long-term interest in improving the quality of life and public welfare of other countries.

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